Review: The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor

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Reviews

Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). 240 pp., ISBN: 978151790298 (paperback, $27)

Reviewed by **Elizabeth Jochum**

Judith Butler proposed that an essential way to understand humanness is through the recognition of a common, corporeal vulnerability. The task of current humanities scholarship, she claims, is to "return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense" (Butler 2004: 151). *The Robotic Imaginary* takes up this call by exploring how the human is both constructed and made unfamiliar by robots within the cultural imaginary. Following previous scholarship that examines the human in light of cybernetics and robotics (especially Lucille Suchman's *Human–Machine Reconfigurations*), Rhee traverses the histories of robotics and AI to demonstrate how normative assumptions and dehumanizing exclusions have informed key developments in these fields. The book brings robot technologies into conversation with cultural and literary studies to consider "the ways the figure of the robot across culture and technology inscribes and challenges these various definitions and dehumanizing exclusions" (29). Although the instances are drawn primarily from literature, film and media theorists will enjoy the capacious discussion of the ongoing entanglement between science fact and science fiction in robotics. The book makes a makes a strong case for the potential of artistic practice to create alternate human–robot relations and new capacities for empathic action, issues that take on new urgency given recent public debate concerning the human costs of robots and AI.

The subtitle of the book directs attention to dehumanizing practices that persist in the automation of devalued labor, labor that continues to be devalued, Rhee argues, because of its associations with gender and race. The first three chapters focus on what Rhee (after Leopoldina Fortunati) labels "reproductive labor": practices of caring, specifically material and immaterial forms of labor that provide care to others through attention to physical, emotional, and educational well-being (32). Rhee connects these forms of care labor, traditionally associated with women and minorities, to conversational agents such as Joseph

Weizenbaum's ELIZA and the disembodied AI characters in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*. The imaginary AIs reflect broader cultural narratives and thematize "the gendered resonances of reproductive labor and its exploitative devaluation in contemporary capitalism" (37). These AIs are contrasted with robotic artworks that invert the paradigm of care, creating spectacles or social systems where humans assume care for vulnerable machines (Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe's *Robot K-456*, Norman White's *Helpless Robot*, Momoyo Torimitsu's *Miyata Jiro*, and Simon Penny's *Petit Mal*). The critical potential of these works stems from their disavowal of the dehumanizing abstractions that underlie cybernetics and from their gestures toward an "ethics grounded in care" (65). The argument is convincing, but it is also worth considering that shared corporeal vulnerability might be more readily established with embodied machines than disembodied software. Furthermore, with the exception of *Miyata Jiro*, none of the artworks relate to the racialized or gendered entanglements that are the chief concern of the book. This incongruity speaks to the risks of trying to cover too much ground: Rhee draws many fascinating connections across fields, but the threads do not always come together and sometimes the comparisons feel forced.

Corporeal vulnerability and embodiment are more directly explored in Chapter 2 ("Thinking") around the humanoid robots that occupy the closed worlds of Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*. Rhee draws parallels between dehumanizing exclusions at the site of domestic labor with the foundational principles of symbolic (classical) AI and approaches for behavior-based robotics (nouvelle AI). Film scholars might be disappointed by the scant discussion of *Ex Machina*, much of which reaffirms previous scholarship that points up the racist depiction of gendered robots, where white female empowerment comes at the expense of Asian bodies (88). Rhee's assertion that robot vacuums (she singles out Rodney Brooks's company iRobot) are in conversation with the legacy of mindless, laboring female robots of science fiction feels tenuous, considering that similar robots have been deployed across a wide range of sectors. Automation and robotics pose real threats to human labor; I'm just not convinced that robot vacuums (and the software that controls them) are any more entangled with dehumanizing exclusions than robots that replace miners underground (jobs disproportionately held by men). As in the previous chapter, the robot artworks do not illuminate Rhee's argument but rather seem to be at odds with it. Rhee claims that these works create a "common corporeal vulnerability" (144), but each of them (created by white male artists) privilege the embodied experience of the white, Western male subject and do not address devalued labor or the status of women of color or white working-class women. Chapter 3 ("Feeling") takes up the question of emotional labor and social robotics, specifically the emotional capacity of androids in Philip K. Dick's *We Can Build You* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* where humanness

is constructed around emotional performances that hinge (according to Rhee) on the capacity to experience shame. The literary androids are contrasted with *Kismet* and *Leonardo*, two social robots developed at MIT Media Lab in the 1990s and 2000s. Given the proliferation of assistive robot technologies in the last decade, one wonders about the omission of the commercially available robots (e.g., *Nao*, *Pepper*, *Paro*) that are actively transforming reproductive labor in healthcare and education.

The book's most compelling argument is made in Chapter 4 ("Dying"), which considers how drone technology "and its entanglement with colonialism and racism, is predisposed to see certain lives not as humans but as expendable and threatening targets" (162). The chapter contrasts affective technologies that function as social subjects (Chapters 1–3) with technologies that mediate deadly encounters between human subjects. Ethical arguments for drone warfare claim precision and the ability to remove the messiness of emotions and human subjectivity from warfare, a gross oversimplification that ignores the human operators who make decisions predicated on racialized and dehumanized modes of seeing. Rhee locates instances in the robotic imaginary where the myth of knowability and precision come apart, identifying two strategies of engagement. The first thematizes the dehumanizing gaze but remains complicit in reinstating erasures, while the second explores drone warfare in ways that are predicated on unknowability, such as Teju Cole's *Seven Short Stories*, Omer Fast's *5,000 Feet Is the Best*, and James Bridle's *Dronestagram*. These works propose possibilities for human–machine relations that are configured through strangeness and unknowability rather than familiarity. This idea is indebted to Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity (whom Rhee cites): "What might be necessary instead is a relation (of representation and otherwise) that insists on not just difference and the failure to overcome difference, but the apperception of the fundamental unfamiliarity and unknowability in others and oneself" (170).

Through attempts to reproduce the human, roboticists claim to move closer to understanding that which makes us human. *The Robotic Imaginary* challenges this claim by calling attention to the dangerous exclusions and omissions that shape our current technologies. Media and film scholars might wish for more examples from film and television, but there is ample discussion of the historical-cultural context of robotics and AI in connection with literary science fiction, and many of the works have been subsequently adapted for the screen. The book points toward the cultural imaginary as a vital place where we might approach the future of automation and labor more humanely.

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Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018). xv + 315pp., ISBN: 9781786732507 (PDF eBook, $82.50)

Reviewed by **Graeme Stout**

If the past decade has witnessed a steady growth in the critical study of video games—albeit one that covers only a fraction of the world of video games—Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Politics of Race, Gender and Space* offers a much-needed addition to the critical literature. This book mixes analyses of narrative structures and formal analyses with a critical study of how race, gender, and space (as suggested by the title) are articulated in video game worlds, their mechanics, and their popular reception. Murray focuses her analyses on the world of popular, big-budget games, arguing that these should be the main focus given that their popularity speaks to larger cultural anxieties, issues, and identities. She argues that these "dominant" games need to be a central focus of analysis given their massive reach as well as the ways that they have developed into larger game and entertainment franchises. In particular, she focuses on those games that are either set in historical periods (e.g., *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* [Ubisoft, 2012]) or those situated in a recognizable, if fantastic, version of our current moment (e.g., *The Last of Us* [Sony, 2013], *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* [Konami, 2015], and *Remember Me* [Capcom, 2013]), arguing that these games, through their larger narratives and game-world environments, explore identity as a central theme of their single-player format, reinforcing anxieties over race and gender identity. Here, her reading of white male anxiety in *The Last of Us* provides a solid critical reading that could be mapped onto many other contemporary dystopian narratives. Murray's analyses are both persuasive and insightful; she balances a close reading of

individual video-game elements (character, backstory, franchise narratives) with larger critical readings of contemporary popular culture. Her insistence on the importance of video games as a dominant mode of constructing, reinforcing, and critiquing structures of race, gender, and neoliberal ideology offers—especially in her readings of eight major video-game titles—a critical basis from which future research will benefit and upon which it can be built.

Although Murray makes a strong case for the focus on more commercial titles, it would be productive to discuss the ways in which more independent titles from within the world of video games could add to, or challenge, her analyses. Here, it would be interesting to see if the same cultural anxieties and assumptions that Murray points to would be evident in games not produced by major game development companies. Additionally, her use of the single-player game as a means to understand how identity is played out in popular culture would be added to by a consideration of more open and collective forms of video-game play. Here, massively multiplayer and team-based video-game experiences (especially in relationship to contemporary military video games) might offer additional insights into the ways that race, gender, and space are presupposed, articulated, and reinforced. These are not weaknesses in, or criticisms of, the book as such. Murray has a strong line of analysis that, as with any other book, needs to limit its scope in order to function as a unified work. These would, however, be additional projects that Murray, and others building off of her analyses, could pursue in order to broaden the reach of critical cultural analysis in the world of video games.

One of the additional benefits of the book is that it offers a highly useful analysis of the key thinkers and theories deployed within the field of cultural studies. In her analysis of contemporary narrative video games, Murray offers a strong case for using key figures (e.g., Mieke Bal, Jean Baudrillard, Richard Dyer, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Adrienne Shaw) within the critical history of studies of race, gender, and ethnicity to shine a critical light on the ways in which we analyze, discuss, and play video games. Such an approach is part of Murray's intent to add this critical focus to video-game studies, seeing it as a field that needs to reckon with the ways in which such games are, in her words, a form of "cultural palimpsest." This foregrounding of cultural theory allows *On Video Games* to work as a much-needed addition to the growing critical literature. It also allows the text to function, with its detailed analyses of major video-game titles, as a considerable teaching tool—either in whole or excerpt—that shows the continued relevance and political urgency of cultural studies for understanding twenty-first-century media forms. Here, Murray's book adds to and updates the work done by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (*Games of Empire*, 2009) and by Patrick Crogan (*Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture*, 2011) on the relationship of video-game technologies to larger structures of power and imperialism.

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Ari Larissa Heinrich, *Chinese Surplus: Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Medically Commodified Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). 264 pp., ISBN: 9780822370536 (paperback, $25.95)

Reviewed by **Brian Bergen-Aurand**

In an 11 July 2018 interview with Roberto Sirvent for *Black Agenda Report*, Ari Larissa Heinrich lays out the argument and stakes of *Chinese Surplus*:

> *My book describes ways in which cutting-edge biomedical technology actually perpetuates certain inequalities—as well as ways that artists can respond critically to these inequalities. My book offers case studies of representations of Chinese people and cultures in experimental art and popular science, but you can find examples from* any *context where art and popular science use biotechnological innovations to describe historically disenfranchised groups.*

According to Heinrich, the line between the humanities and the sciences is more porous than we want to admit when we claim that either a belief in science or an investment in the humanities will resolve our contemporary cultural impasse. In fact, Heinrich continues, by studying the movement across this artificial boundary we chance to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the sciences and the humanities work together to thwart progressive political agendas and maintain the status quo, thus depriving underclasses of their rights and privileges. In other words, Heinrich argues that massive advances in bio-

technology do not necessarily equate to great transformations in the social and cultural hierarchies that produce them. In fact, they may often mirror or replicate them and more often even amplify or exaggerate them. Challenging these assumptions and codifications of injustice is the ethical and political charge of Heinrich's work here and elsewhere. Hence, *Chinese Surplus* is a book that writes "biopolitics into the script of literary, visual, and popular cultural critiques of contemporary materials featuring the human body" (8) in a way that uses the history of the sciences of embodiment to reflect back on the aesthetic foundations it locates beneath that history.

I first encountered Heinrich's work in the 2006 collection *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, which is edited by Heinrich and Fran Martin, who both serve on the editorial board of *Screen Bodies*. Heinrich's contribution to that collection, "Souvenirs of the Organ Trade: The Diasporic Body in Contemporary Chinese Literature and Art," seems to be an initial foray into research and discussions of the effect and affects of the contact zone connecting the sciences and humanities. Here, in *Chinese Surplus*, Heinrich has connected several more projects, across a number of additional mediums and situations, to deliver a scholarly intervention across an important variety of texts, screens, and historical moments set in the United States, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, the United Kingdom, Mainland China, and several other locations. It is one of the vital effects of Heinrich's work to present a study that is at once so specifically located while also exceeding that very locatedness. Summarizing this tack in the Introduction, Heinrich explains that "the case studies I examine in this book may be grounded in Chinese and cultural studies, but they speak directly to a web of intimacies that extends well beyond" (3).

Chinese Surplus takes what Heinrich calls a "synthetic approach" (14) to ask how we think about the body, how we imagine the body politic, and how we attend to "representations of corporeality in the age of biotech" (14). Looking at how we value corporeality, especially excess corporeality and abject corporeality in the light of both aesthetics and medicine, Heinrich works to expose how "biopolitical aesthetics is what happens when life as surplus meets life as form" (14). And, in this intervention into "biopolitical aesthetics," into the interactions between the sciences and the humanities, then, Heinrich shows how aesthetics determines what counts as human because, contrary to common understanding, Heinrich argues, biopolitical aesthetics preconditions cultural and scientific change. Since they are founded on aesthetics, then, the sciences are never freed from the hierarchies of race, class, gender, ability, and enfranchisement. The sciences and the humanities exist in a situation where colonization and enslavement continue to linger, and where the abject Chinese body, which now may (or may not) stand in for universal human corporeality, may (or may not) interrupt biopolitics as we have known it.

In each chapter, as *Chinese Surplus* sharpens the focus of this investigation into the relation between biopolitics and aesthetics, Heinrich also approaches evermore "popular" aesthetic objects and widens the scope of these investigations into how we define "life" and who counts as "human" while never abandoning the Sinocentric focus that lies at the book's core. Through this method, we can begin to see how as the (human/Chinese) body becomes increasingly commodified and commodifiable, as we imagine it evermore as an aggregate or assemblage, we are confronted by questions of authority and authenticity that cannot return to the original body for verification. To this end, *Chinese Surplus* engages with colonial values and artifacts, turn-of-the-twentieth-century documents, late-capitalist elite literature and performance art, a variety of cinema, and then the global phenomenon of the plastinated cadaver exhibition—which, given its worldwide popularity, more of us have heard about or seen in person than not. The scope of the book widens, yet the focus remains precisely narrow, attending to all the hierarchies of value in place at each aperture.

Chapter 1 focuses on plastic and performance art, specifically the question of the millennial Chinese "cadaver artists" who use bodily material (skin, limbs, preserved fetuses, blood) as mediums for their projects. Heinrich situates these artists within the contemporary transnational environment of "increasingly dissociated corporeal aesthetics" (17), where the body has become a composite set of transferable parts rather than an inviolate, organic whole. This view of corporeality, argues Heinrich, develops out of the age of industrialization, mass mechanical reproduction, and manufacturing methods based on identical, interchangeable parts. This development, notes Heinrich, coincides with the birth of biopolitics and provides a way of connecting experimental art, the arrival of the figure of Frankenstein in China, the popular image of China as a "sleeping lion," and the story of the famous *Tipu's Tiger* automaton, which is now on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Thus, Heinrich begins outlining how a shift in conceptions of the (Chinese) body relates to alterations in scientific investigations of the body during the age of colonialism and increasing (Chinese) diasporism.

Chapter 2 carries forward this argument regarding the trans-effects (transnational, transferable, transient, transformed, etc.) of this biopolitical situation by linking the cadaver artists to Chinese literary figures from the 1980s, the moment of the first-known translation of *Frankenstein* into Chinese. (The metaphor of "Frankenstein's monster" had arrived nearly a century before the novel itself through transnational political commentary.) Along the way, Heinrich develops further this argument regarding the composite body to show how it has transitioned into "the more diasporic figure made possible by contemporary advancements in biotech" (18). Here, (Chinese) aesthetics and (Chinese) identity come into contact with global biopolitics and communication to challenge any suspicion of an essentialist, direct connection between body and identity.

Juxtaposing close readings of individual works by Zhu Yu, Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu—especially their focus on corporeal transformation—with "popular understandings of the medically commodified body," Heinrich links contemporary images of embodiment with a new vocabulary and emergent form of storytelling and global exchange (18).

Chapter 3 compares the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of mainstream and independent films from the United States, Hong Kong, and Thailand. While the focus in the other chapters has been on elite or "archival" aesthetic inquiry, in this one Heinrich addresses the popular and truly global phenomenon of transnational Chinese cinema, especially with regard to transnational organ transplant. Comparing various aspects of Fruit Chan's 1996 *Made in Hong Kong* and Danny Pang and Oxide Pang's 2002 *The Eye*, Heinrich explores how these examples from the "new organ transplant cinema" (91) approach the linkages of corporeal vulnerability and (im)permeable transnational boundaries. As the chapter shows, conversations about transnational organ donations are always already discussions of economic and social inequity, identitarian anxiety, and unequal global labor flows brought to the fore by close examinations of the technologies of surveillance, representation, and diagnosis that screen our bodies and our borders. The diasporic body is the class-coded, diagnosis-ladened body in this chapter that, perhaps better than any other in the book, opens us to an analysis of the *trans-age* of transnational, transgenre, transplant, transgender, and transgressive corporeality (103).

Chapter 4 and the Epilogue examine reactions to global plastinated cadaver exhibitions, such as *Body Worlds* and *Body Exploration*, in an attempt to "decouple the densely layered rhetoric of the 'human' in the context of Western exhibitions from the bodies' manufacture, circulation, and reception as spectacular artifacts worldwide" (19). Comparing Western and Chinese popular-press coverage of the exhibitions, Heinrich juxtaposes the North American and European focus on the "human rights" issues of the provenance of the (Chinese) bodies and the "availability" of surplus parts (and people?) in China with Chinese-language discussions of education, nationalism, and (sometimes) the origin of the bodies. This comparison exposes the continuation of certain historical (colonial) discourses as well as the economic and political biases of these "highly divergent approaches to the medically commodified body in contemporary life" (20). The chapter invokes again the question of the origin of the bodies and organs (for these exhibits or for transnational distribution) and claims about the controversial generation and disposal of corpses but does not center them. Rather, the focus here is on the relation among these examples of extraordinarily popular Chinese transnational cultural production, the universality of the "human" they assert and have asserted about them, and the "Chineseness" that exoticizes and abjects them.

It is this final point that raises the question of the value of the exhibitions and emphasizes their status as property. The bodies both profit from and are haunted by their exposure and display. Thus, they conjure questions of authenticity, of aura, and of the body's existence "as purely a biotechnological *product*" (146). These questions remind us that "the body finds itself at a unique point in the history of its own commodification" (146)—a moment not delinked from corporeal history but, rather, materialized within a matrix subsumed with it. Reading *Chinese Surplus*, one might anxiously begin to ask: exactly how many body parts can one replace and still remain oneself? And, how does this apply differently to Chinese bodies and Chinese body parts? If, as this book demonstrates, aesthetics preconditions science, then answers to questions like these are questions for the humanities from the start.

As all such good critical analyses do, *Chinese Surplus* certainly raises a number of crucial questions about the contemporary situation, embodiment, the imaginary, and how we "screen" race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, medicine, and science. At this moment, the question I would ask back to it and its author pertains to the relationship between biopolitics and aesthetics with regard to the role of *perception*, and, perhaps, to the relation between perception and disability and to the interactions of vulnerability, trauma, and comfort the book touches on repeatedly but never quite embraces. In the Introduction, Heinrich remarks that

> *this book aims to incorporate race into biopolitical critiques of aesthetics in medicine, science, and history; however, it also acknowledges that models for the more precise relationship of biopolitics to aesthetics—by which I mean all those things that describe how something looks, feels, sounds, or acts on the senses, the arts of* perception *broadly speaking—remain harder to find. (7)*

I would suggest that this model might be found in disability studies, especially disability screen studies, where who is perceiving and what and how they are perceiving are of the utmost importance, especially with regard to dis-ease, dis-traction, and dis-play. In such a light, we might begin to expand Heinrich's reading of *The Eye* to ask how (following the Derrida of *Memoirs of the Blind*, for instance) all acts of seeing are always already traumatic and how we all seek "to re-create the comfort of blindness" (109).

In the end, though, it might suffice to return to Heinrich's interview with Sirvent for the *Black Agenda Report* to be reminded of what is at stake in reading *Chinese Surplus*:

> *Like many academics in the humanities whose work originates in a kind of idealism, I hope to contribute in some way to imagining a new and better world. But I have no illusions about the struggle that must happen along the way. One area to explore more deeply is the mutual interconnectedness of art and science in the age of biotech. We default too easily to the assumption that art is always distinct from science, when in fact art and science are deeply intertwined and always have been.*

This book serves as a careful appraisal of the biopolitical moment we inhabit, and this quote addresses well the audience and intent of Heinrich's book. While *Chinese Surplus* might speak more directly to thinkers in the humanities, especially those of us engaged in studies of screens and bodies, it does offer terms we all might prioritize for reconsidering the boundary between the sciences and the humanities. Those terms—conceived through the lens of an aesthetics of embodiment—already play a central role in the sciences. *Beauty* and *elegance* already are concepts central to evaluating scientific thought. Now, though, perhaps with Heinrich's help, we might also begin to consider further the biopolitical stakes of those values.

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